



BELARUS by Iryna Ulasiuk

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Overview

The 1990s were marked in Belarus by a recent dissolution of the Soviet system of education due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and a common understanding of the need to introduce changes into the national system of education in light of the changed status of a newly independent Belarusian state. Since then, Belarus has been engaged in reforming its educational system. The most significant changes comprised the transition to a 12-year schooling system in 1998, the introduction of the 10-point pupil assessment scale in 2002, the transition to the two-level higher education system in 2007 and the introduction of the competence-based approach in 2011.

It should be noted, however, that because of the high degree of centralisation and often the absence of a clear understanding of necessary changes in education, these reforms have not been implemented successfully.

That said, the education in Belarus is repeatedly referred to as an important resource and a condition for technological progress, social and economic development of the country.¹ The long-term objective is to create an educational system which meets the needs of individual person's development, society and the State, creating conditions

for further development of the system and preparing new generations for life and work in a civil society with the sustainable market economy.²

The educational system of Belarus is comprised of preschool education; primary education followed by lower secondary, which together constitute the basic or compulsory cycle; upper secondary education, which may be academic, vocational or specialized (also known as technical or professional) education; and higher education.

The entrance school age is six years old. The general education cycle is eleven years, of which nine, the basic education, are compulsory. Since 1 September 2002, schools have been using a five-day working week, and a ten-point grading system.

The structure of schooling

The educational system of Belarus is characterized by highly centralized mechanisms of governance and control of educational establishments at all levels by the State. The system of educational administration and control follows a strictly hierarchical model.

The Ministry of Education of Belarus has overall responsibility for the development of the education system. It is accountable for the proper functioning of the system of education, elaboration of educational standards, curricula and educational programmes, control of the quality of education, implementation of experimental and innovative programmes, implementation of the state policy concerning teaching staff and coordination of international cooperation in the sphere of education.

Most educational establishments, all other levels of educational administration and all support services (including research and training institutions) are subordinated to the Ministry.

For general educational establishments, curricula are passed by the Ministry of Education on a yearly basis regulating schooling in detail. Other major players in the governance of the education system at the national level are the Department of Quality Assurance, the National Institute of Education (pre-school and general school education), the Institute of Higher Education, the Institute of Professional Education (vocational education) and the Academy of Post-Diploma Education.

In a framework of a clear-cut of top-down model of decision-making school administration has a three-tiered structure including the national, the regional and municipal levels.

Below the national level, each of the seven regions of Belarus has its own regional educational department. These departments design the programmes of development of pre-school and general secondary education, assess the human resources' needs, and organise retraining and in-service training programmes. Their departments are accountable to the Ministry of Education, whereas municipal educational departments report to regional educational departments.

The legal framework

The main legislative documents governing the field of education in Belarus include the Constitution, adopted in 1994 and amended by the Republican Referendum in 1996, the recently adopted (2011) Education Code, laws and government decrees.

At the constitutional level, two specific provisions have direct reference to the right to education. Article 49 guarantees the actual right to receive education by everybody, free primary education as well as general and equal access to secondary education. It further specifies that secondary special and higher education shall be accessible to all according to the capabilities of each student. The right to choose the language of instruction and tuition, and thus be educated in one's mother tongue in accordance with the existing legislation is stipulated by Article 50 of the Constitution.

The Education Code (2011) is the principal legislative instrument which spells out the main features of the structure of education and educational policy in Belarus and is aimed at providing an overall education strategy regulating all levels of the education system. It deals with social relations in the field of education, defines the levels and types of education, its objectives, and also determines the role of teachers, their rights, functions and responsibilities.

The Code is based on the approved laws regulating the education system and it is not designed to introduce conceptual changes. The Code has thus incorporated the provisions of the main legal documents governing the field of education such as:

- Law on Education (1991, with amendments in 2002) which defined the general principles of the state policy in education and its principles, the system of education, requirements and relations between involved actors, including the rights and obligations of teachers;
- Law on General Secondary Education (2006, with amendments in 2009) which regulated the process of education at this level, established educational standards, clearly defined the types of secondary education institutions,

requirements and tasks of teachers;

- Law on Special Education (2004) which determined the system of special education, requirements to teachers' qualifications and skills
- Law on Higher Education (2007) which introduced the two-level system of higher education: Specialist degree level (4-5 years) and Master's degree level (1-2 years), admission procedures, forms of education and types of higher education institutions.

According to the Code, the milestones of education policy are compulsory basic education and the transition towards compulsory general secondary education, continuity in education, priority of human values, human rights and the human character of education, which means free choice in teaching methods for trainers and educational institutions.

Educational legislation also includes Cabinet decisions and Presidential decrees.

Freedom to establish non-state schools

Non-state educational institutions in Belarus are subject to the regulation provided in the Code for Education. The Code refers to private education on several occasions. It clearly states in Article 19 (6) that in Belarus 'educational establishments can be both public and private'. The Code further stipulates that apart from the President, the government; government agencies etc. educational institutions can be founded by legal entities and private persons holding Belarusian citizenship (Article 21), excluding religious organisations. The Code for Education stresses that the state policy in the field of education is based on the secular character of education (Article 2(1.10)). Thus, religious education is not taught as a school subject, either in State or private schools. The principle underlying the law is the separation of secular and religious education, and this disallows any form of religious or atheist education, in fact it bans even the use of school areas for Sunday religious schools. According to Article 2(4) only optional extra-curriculum courses can take place in schools - after school time, for those who have expressed the desire in writing to attend such courses. Thus, it basically means that religious organizations are not eligible to open a secondary school with a religious mission. Churches can have the so-called "Sunday schools" in parishes or ecclesiastical centres.

Financing of private educational institutions is done at the expense of the founders, the funds derived from income-generating activities, donations by legal entities,

individual entrepreneurs and other sources that are not prohibited by law (Article 137 (2)).

In order to carry out their activities, non-state educational institutions must first obtain a special license from the Ministry of Education (Article 109). A license is issued in light of the curricula and syllabi proposed, the potential availability of the teaching staff and of technical and other supplies etc. Furthermore, non-state educational institutions in Belarus are obliged to follow educational standards developed by the Ministry for Education (Article 109). As Article 92 (3) of the Code stipulates these standards are applicable ‘to all educational institutions, other organizations, individual entrepreneurs, which in accordance with the law are granted the right to carry out educational activities’. These standards concern requirements for the content of education, organization of educational process, the maximum workload for students and the level of knowledge the pupils should have on the completion of the studies in a given educational institution (Article 154).

The development of private education emerged in Belarus as one of many consequences of the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, the proportion of private general education institutions has remained quite low. Thus, in 1995 there were five non-state general education institutions, their number rose to nine in 1998³ and remained the same at the beginning of 2009/2010 school year with the enrolment of 586 pupils.⁴ The overall share of pupils in private schools is about 0.1 percent which is the lowest in all the CIS countries. The main reasons for this trend are the absence of government support both financially and politically.

Homeschooling

In accordance with Article 158 (1.2) of the Code for Education the educational process in the framework of general secondary education can be organized in educational institutions, *at home* or in health care organizations.

Article 1 (16) of the Code defines homeschooling as the organisation of the educational process during which the curriculum of general secondary education is learnt by a pupil who temporarily or permanently can't attend educational institutions at his home rather than in other formal settings of public or private school.

Further, the Code on Education specifies that the acquisition of general secondary education at home is organized for students who for medical reasons, temporarily or permanently unable to attend an education institution (Article 160(1)). The educational process is then organized by a state educational institution located close

to the home of a child or by an educational institution the child used to attend before medical complications preventing him from going to school emerged. (Article 160 (2)). The decision on homeschooling in the above-mentioned situations is taken by the department of education of the local executive body on the submission of the application of the child (his representatives) and the certificate of the medical board.

A list of medical conditions required for the application for homeschooling was established by the Decree of the Ministry of Health of Belarus in May 2011.⁶⁶

Thus, the State authorizes homeschooling for medical reasons. However, a closer look at the Code reveals that although not explicitly mentioned homeschooling is also possible on two other conditions:

- if a child is exceptionally talented, or
- if a child cannot attend school temporarily or permanently ‘for good reasons’.

In such cases a child is entitled to studying following an individual plan of studies (Article 167 (1). The right to studying in accordance with an individual educational plan is reiterated by Article 31 (1.5) which among the principal rights of the pupils names the right to study in accordance with an individual educational plan. In that case a child is registered with a school and is allowed to attend any additional classes he/she wishes. According to the Code, home education should meet the requirements of the curriculum for public schools and thus the home schooler is required to come to school for regular tests. Homeschooling can be an option for families living temporarily abroad, and allows for more travelling. Also young athletes, poets, artists and actors can be taught at home.

Several questions arise, however, as to the practical implementation of the forenamed right. Given the vagueness of the formulation of ‘the good reasons’ and ‘exceptionally talented child’, and that homeschooling is rather broadly categorized as a specific form of education, there are no guarantees that permission to educate a child at home will be provided in case of demand. In practice, such matters are left to the sole discretion of local educational authorities. Outside the outlined two reasons, which are not always easy to justify, a parent cannot just come to school and say that he/she opts for home schooling. As one of parents said: “In practice, to justify one’s wish to follow an individual plan of studies is not always easy. It is good if the child has musical or other talent, or if the parents travel a lot. And if not? To openly claim that ‘we just want to develop our child in a different way, we want to give the child more possibilities is just impossible.”⁵ Interestingly, commenting on the possibility of transferring a child from attending a school regularly to studying in accordance with the individual plan because of parents’ religious beliefs, Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Culture, Science and the

Scientific and Technical Progress, Vladimir Zdanowicz noted that ‘Religious beliefs should not interfere with the integrity of the child’s education. If a school allows parents to educate their children individually because of their religious beliefs, it is a violation of the law by the school administration. This should not happen.’⁶

Finally, while not restricted by law, education provided otherwise than through the schooling system is not very much socially acceptable, considered undesirable by school authorities and is virtually non-existent.

School choice not limited by family income

The Code for Education specifies in Article 2(1.4) that the state policy in education is based on the principle of ensuring equal access to education to all. Among the main directions of the state policy in education, the Code mentions in Article 2 (2.2, 2.4) providing access to education and creating the conditions necessary to meet the needs of the individual to education. The right to education is guaranteed, among other things, through (Article 3 (7.6.)) the creation of conditions for education in accordance with national traditions, as well as individual needs and abilities of students and (Article 3 (7.7.)) through granting an opportunity to select an institution of education, specialization, forms of education, level of studying of academic subjects, educational areas, topics. Moreover, the state undertakes the responsibility to provide, albeit in vague terms, pupils living outside the area of the institution they are attending with accommodation on a campus for the period of studies. However, this refers primarily to several disadvantaged categories of people, although low level of income of parents does not give rise to the right to free accommodation. Moreover, this right can be used only when studying in a state educational institution (Article 44(3.5)), no reference is given whatsoever with regard to non-state educational institutions. Transportation to and from school (either by public transport or by school buses) is yet another right mentioned in the Code (Article 47). Free transportation is provided to pupils of basic secondary education living in rural areas. Interestingly, the Code mentions that such transportation is provided to children to go to kindergartens but only in case the place in an educational institution in the area the child lives in was not granted. (Article 47 (3))

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

Distinctive character

The Belarusian education system has undergone substantive changes since the end of the Soviet era. Secondary education is now 11 years instead of 10 (twelfth grade education was

an initiative tried and abandoned in the late 2000s), the grading system has changed to allow teachers a wider spectrum for evaluating student performance (a 10-point grading system replaced the 5-point system), and system wide testing has been introduced to assess student learning at the end of their basic education (9th grade) and upon completion of secondary education (11th grade). The format of university entrance exams has also been changed to a more objective system, which includes standardized testing rather than oral exams. These changes parallel a global shift toward standardization in education and a move away from Soviet-style testing and student performance assessment. Notwithstanding these changes they do not fundamentally affect the organization of schools or the centralization of education that has always characterized education in Belarus. The content of education and forms of control are based on the curricula developed according to state requirements, as well as regional and national peculiarities. The Communist indoctrination programs, which were a significant part of the curricula during the Soviet times, have been replaced by more diversified courses that allow room for alternative points of view and personal opinions, but the state control of education is strong and reveals itself in the requirements of the content of education, which are prescribed by the executive organs of the Republic. The state standards include an obligatory list of subjects and the minimum number of hours assigned for them. Thus the curriculum to be taught is developed by the Ministry of Education and is relevant for all the schools in the country. In some subjects there are several options for textbooks that the teachers may choose from, but for most subjects there are no choices for textbooks. Teachers however are able to supplement the textbooks with materials of their choosing, although the problem may arise because the state-mandated curriculum is so rigorous that there is little opportunity to add substantively to the required materials.

Until 2008, Belarusian schools were able to provide specialized subjects area courses to students adding to the mandated state curriculum. As a matter of fact, in addition to the traditional general education secondary schools, the 1990s saw the development of new types of institutions—gymnasiums and lyceums. Gymnasiums provide comprehensive humanistic education, often centered on the study of foreign languages. They are expected to have a highly qualified teaching staff, use innovative textbooks, and to have modern methods of teaching. Lyceums offer professionally oriented education and are usually affiliated with higher educational or research institutions. For example, students could attend a school with intensive English language study or one specializing in mathematics. Many cities and towns had schools that specialized in different subjects and disciplines and these schools were really important since they offered diverse educational opportunity. Under new education legislation, all schools must now provide the same educational opportunities. Specialized schools have been forced to redistribute or eliminate extra subject hours that had previously been allocated to specialized subjects. Despite that requirement, many schools have found ways to retain their legacy in education quality. Today, many schools continue to offer the same classes with the rigor of subject specialization as in the past, but it is now done as elective courses or during extracurricular hours, outside the curriculum.

Decisions about admitting pupils

Article 159 of the Code for Education deals in detail with the requirements for the admission of persons to institutions of general secondary education. Most generally, the admission of pupils is done upon the submission of a written request together with the required supporting documents by parents or caregivers of the child. The school selection and consequently the admission to a school is dependent on the residence of the applicant. Thus most applications will be sent by parents to a neighbourhood school. Article 159 of the Code foresees that pupils can be admitted to institutions of general secondary education on the basis of the results of admission tests, tests of aptitude, for example, tests of abilities to engage in an individual sport (in a particular field of art), and (or) taking into account health conditions, sports performance. The Code refers to several types of institutions of general secondary education to which entrance examinations are permitted and the selection process is dependent upon the results of such examinations. These are gymnasiums, state run boarding gymnasiums, gymnasiums - art schools.

The list, terms and order of the entrance examinations/tests are determined by the statute of the institution or its type.

Several exceptions are envisaged in the law with a view to enable disadvantaged children to receive positive discrimination. Thus, orphans and children left without parental care; children from large families and children living in rural communities with populations of less than 20,000 people are admitted to state- run boarding schools (gymnasiums) outside the competition provided that the mark they receive in the admission test is not lower than 6 (a ten-mark system is used in Belarusian schools with marks ranging from 1 to 10).

Decisions about staff

Articles 20 (1), 26(1.3) and 28 (1) of the Code on Education stipulate that educational institutions of different ownership are free to choose the teaching staff and the assignment of the teaching load within the limits envisaged by the law. Article 51 briefly touches upon the requirements towards the teaching staff, noting that several categories of persons are not allowed to conduct teaching activities, among them persons who have lost such a right, those having a criminal liability, etc. While formally granted freedom to choose teachers who will be engaged into the teaching process, school directors rely almost exclusively upon formal qualifications of the applicants. This holds true both for state and private schools. Religious beliefs of the

teachers do not act as an advantage in the selection process as religion is excluded from the national curriculum.

Article 53 of the Code of Education delineates a range of responsibilities that teachers have and in accordance with which they must carry out their activities. The failure to comply with these requirements might lead to firing a teacher. Among such responsibilities the Code lists professionalism, proper realization of educational programmes and programmes of student upbringing, and respect for pupils and other participants of the educational process. In point 3 of Article 53 the Code prohibits engagement of teachers in political actions which run counter to the Constitution and the laws of the republic. Involvement in such activities will have adverse effect in the decision of hiring or not hiring a teacher.

Accountability for school quality

In compliance with Article 91 of the Code on Education, among the main requirements for the organisation of the educational process are:

- the provision of good-quality education
- competency-based approach
- protection of the students' health
- compliance with the established duration of the scholastic year, school holidays, periods and forms of the attestation of school children

In accordance with a Programme of the Republican Monitoring of the Quality of Secondary Education in 2009-2014, several aspects of the teaching/learning process are the focus of attention of the monitoring bodies. First and foremost is the level of the knowledge acquired by school children in various subjects and their readiness for the final exams which are also the entrance exams to higher educational institutions. Since one of the primary goals of the school education is the development of the talents and special gifts of students, schools are monitored from the point of view of the conditions they provide in order to develop creative abilities of the students (effectiveness of the optional classes, tutorials, etc. offered to talented students is assessed). Other factors taken into consideration are didactic (distribution of class hours on a studied topic, discrepancies in the curricula and requirements of the entrance exams, the quality of the schoolbooks etc.), methodological (level of the

methodological qualifications of the teachers, etc). To what extent the school complies with the state standards of education and curricula developed by the Ministry of Education) is yet another important criterion is the evaluating school performance. Schools are also monitored from the point of view of the teaching staff they employ, their level of education, qualification categories acquired by the teachers, timely provision of teacher training and the rate at which the teaching staff changes. Protection of students' health is yet another burning issue the Belarusian educational system is confronted with in view of the negative consequences the Chernobyl disaster had on the health of the Belarusian population generally and on the health of the young Belarusians. Thus, monitoring is done with regard to the compliance with a five-day learning week, the observance of the minimum and maximum volume of the workload of the students in accordance with the requirements of the educational standard of the secondary education; school meals; organisation of the physical training and promotion of a healthy standard of living.

The state bodies are directly appointed by and accountable to the President of Belarus (Article 124(2)) which is in itself yet another indicator of a tight oversight of the system by the state characteristic of the functioning of the system of education.

Teaching of values

Article 2 of the Education Code prescribes, among other principles, the following ones upon which the state policy in education is based: the priority of human values, human rights, humanistic nature of education, and secular character of education. It further states that state policy in education aims at ensuring that educational institutions promote the formation of students' spiritual and moral values, develop a conscious attitude towards concepts of citizenship, patriotism, responsibility and hard work. The main components of teaching of values comprise (Article 18 (5) of the Education Code): civic and patriotic education, ideological education, aimed at developing students' knowledge of the ideology practiced by the Belarusian State. As mentioned in various parts of the report, the educational system in Belarus is extremely centralized and is characterised by strict administrative and ideological control by the state. School is also seen as one of the most important propaganda venues. Non-state actors in education (private schools, independent universities, educational NGOs, business education) are comparatively small in number, and are not influential. <http://www.bti-project.org/country-reports/pse/blr/> Academic freedom is not a given thing in Belarus and it comes as no surprise that the recent years have witnessed the return to classrooms of such activity as 'political information' (a feature of the Soviet-time school) used primarily to 'brain-wash' students and 'enlighten' them on the 'positive' developments in the Belarusian state. That is why the free-thinking private European Humanities

University in Minsk became too dangerous for those in power in Belarus and was forced into exile. It is the only university in the history of Belarus to retain real autonomy, despite various forms of pressure by the authorities and one of the few, if not the only University in Europe, in exile.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Programme of Development of Secondary Education in the Republic of Belarus for the period of 2007-2016 (Decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus № 725 of 31.05.2007), part 2.
- ² National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-economic Development of Belarus up to 2020, Minsk, 2004
- ³ World Data on Education, Belarus 2006/07
- ⁴ World Data on Education, Belarus 2010/11
- ⁵ 'Home Schooling: Rare but Precise' 16.12.2011, <http://sb.by/post/124477/>
- ⁶ 'Belarusian Code for Education will not Introduce any Novelties with Regard to Home Schooling and Schooling in Accordance with Individual Plans' 19.10. 2010 ; <http://news.open.by/country/38669>

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